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EDVARD MUNCH

1863—1944

ETCHINGS · LITHOGRAPHS · WOODCUTS

March 6-25, 1944



BUCHHOLZ GALLERY

CURT VALENTIN

32 EAST 57TH STREET · NEW YORK

EDVARD MUNCH · Born December 12, 1863 in Loeifen,
Norway. Died January 24, 1944 in Norway.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: *The Sick Lithograph*, 1895. A legend
written on the margin of this print reads: "I felt a great cry in the
whole universe".

1. V. 1944

EDVARD MUNCH

by FREDERICK B. DEKNATEL

Words of the death of Edvard Munch at the age of 80 in his native Norway in January reached this country through enemy news broadcasts. The end of his life means the departure of one of the few heroes of the days of the initiation of the concepts of modern art who lived to see their spread throughout the world, and who himself enjoyed a productive career down to the present time. Half a century ago in Germany Munch was a storm center in the battle over modernism in art. He lived to see the triumph of the ideas which were once followed by only a small coterie and to hear himself hailed not only as the outstanding painter of Norway, but as one of the masters of modern Europe. Students of modern painting have long recognized him as a significant influence on the art of our time; German Expressionism owes a debt to him as well as to Van Gogh and the French masters of the late Nineteenth Century.

The connection between Munch and the modern school of pre-Nazi Germany goes back to an invitation sent him in 1892 to take part in an exhibition of the Union of German Painters in Berlin. He sent a group of works of new and startling subject matter, some of which were done in techniques which reflected the radical innovations in painting he had seen in Paris

during his stay there in the years 1889-92. The pictures so shocked the more conservative members of the Union that the exhibition was closed almost as soon as it had opened. The progressive members rebelled and formed the Berlin Secession which for years afterward championed modern art. At one stroke Munch had become the spearhead of the attack on academic and realist art in Germany. For the next seventeen years most of his time was spent in that country except for frequent visits to Norway and a return to Paris in 1896 and '97. Munch was closely associated with the leaders of the new movement in Germany, especially the literary men. His work was collected and exhibited in Germany during the time when the Post-Impressionism of the Paris school was becoming known throughout the world. When Munch finally returned to Norway in 1909 to live for the rest of his life, the movement we call Expressionism, the dominant school of German modern art, was well under way.

Through his long visits in Paris at the beginning of the 90's and again in '96 and '97 Munch became thoroughly acquainted with the painters of that city including Van Gogh. The careful student can pick out echoes of almost all the original spirits of the Paris group in his work of this time. Especially evident is the impact of Gauguin's Brittany paintings which is to be seen in the use of large areas of solid stone enclosed by undulating contours—the so-called cloisonné manner—and also in Munch's dependence on the French artist's technique in woodcut. Munch, however, is by no means to be looked on simply as a transmitter of Paris innova-

tions to Berlin and Northern Europe. Before he knew Paris his basic conceptions had been formed. He had turned away from the cool objectivity of the realistic school in which he had been trained in Norway by adapting the technique of his teachers to the expression of an intensively felt dramatic pathos. In Paris he found a similar revolt against "subjectless" Impressionism. Gauguin was being hailed by the Symbolist poets and a group of younger painters as the leader in the evolution of an art which would deal with fundamental ideas and not superficial impressions. Thus Paris was sympathetic to him, but though he enriched himself from her artists, there are important differences between him and the French artists and their followers. The chief difference is a product of their ways of approaching experience. Where Gauguin seeks the inner meaning of life by a deliberate cultivation of an attitude he considers to be that of primitive, natural man, and Van Gogh's work gives evidence in every way of the intuitiveness and intense immediacy of his experiences, Munch is more of an intellectual who penetrates the phenomena of life through a process of inner concentration and analysis. His relation in this respect is rather with the poets and dramatists of the North, particularly with Strindberg whom he knew intimately.

Munch's art is the product of a brooding, introspective search for the meaning of life. A portrait for him is an expression of the inner force of personality; the physical features of a human being are significant only as they reveal this force. In his search for meaning Love and Death are focal points. Subjects are chosen which

bear directly on aspects of these two fundamentals: The Kiss, Jealousy, Puberty, The Three Aspects of Woman, Madonna, The Sick Child, The Death Chamber. When there is no direct relation in subject matter to such specific themes, the same elemental forces are nonetheless involved. Nature exists in Munch's works as a force which produces and is at the same time a reflection of the basic moods of the human psyche. In the lithograph called *The Cry* is the little figure filling the world with his sound or is he crying out in accord with the world of shore and sky from which he tries to protect himself by covering his ears? In the *Girls on the Bridge*, the somber mystery of the end of the day seems to hold the humans under a spell. Their mood and that of the landscape are one. There is no distinction between man and nature as separate entities; the two exist solely in a union of mutual dependence. For Munch this union is in terms of the deepest meaning of living which inevitably must be a relation to Love or Death. Munch actually intended that a large number of his early works should be seen together in proper sequence. They were to be assembled as a Frieze of Life and he divided his frieze into two parts, the Love Series and the Death Series.

Munch is equally significant as a graphic artist and as a painter. With him a print is neither the carrying out in another medium of a preliminary study for a more complete painting nor is it a reproduction of a drawing or an oil painting as was often true of the older generation of Realist and Impressionist painters. It is as complete and independent a work as a painting

itself. Many of the subjects of his paintings are repeated in his prints, but when this is so the graphic work is simply another means of bringing forth the content of the subject. It is significant that the print is usually the last in a series of treatments of a single theme. The more limited vocabulary of the graphic arts is the final challenge to Munch. It is for this reason that he explores each graphic medium for its particular expressive possibilities and exploits these as powerfully as he can. In Munch's graphic work, then, as complete an expression of his thought can be found as in his painting.

To modern art Munch brings a depth of feeling that seems to be wholly Northern. His emotional intensity and expressiveness seem at home in the region of Europe where classical objectivity and pure dependence on the senses have never been indigenous. It is natural that his influence should have been in Germany. His great power to express in visual terms his peculiar sense of the innerness of life affected the young artists of Germany around the beginning of this century both in their attitudes toward experience and in their development of expressive techniques. Munch, however, has a wider significance than that of a contributor to the founding of one powerful modern school. He is one of a great generation of Europeans who have revealed by a variety of methods and in many mediums the nature and the all-embracing power of the forces that are the basis of our consciousness.

Cambridge, March 1944

MARCH 27 — APRIL 22, 1944

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

JUAN GRIS

1887-1927